

LITERATURE

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David Bergelson

**JUDGMENT**

A novel

Translated by Harriet

Murav and Sasha

Senderovich

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Jewish settlers in Ukraine © Bettmann/Getty Images

# Measure of mercy

AMELIA GLASER

On March 2, 1926 the Berlin-based novelist Dovid Bergelson (rendered as “David” by the current publishers), by then a giant of Yiddish prose, declared his allegiance to the Soviet cause in an open letter to the Moscow-based *Der Emes*. The letter began, “I confess my mistake”. Striking a similar but more dramatic tone, Pinye, one of the many smugglers taken prisoner by the Soviet regime in Bergelson’s novel *Judgment* (1929), writes a letter requesting to be shot for his crime, in the hope of saving his life. *Judgment* is set in 1920 (at the height of the Ukrainian Civil War) and its action shifts between Golikhovka – a fictionalized,

dilapidated, shtetl on the Soviet Polish border, where all the residents are implicated in the cross-border smuggling and bribery that takes place each night – and Kamino-Balke, a former monastery turned prison. Kamino-Balke is ruled by the iron fist of the ailing Filipov, a Bolshevik described variously as “a sick carcass”, “a simple worker”, “a revolutionary . . . a real one”, and “a man of iron”. The novel offers a sensitive, and deeply humanizing, portrayal of the petty criminals arrested for anti-Soviet behaviour, whose fate will be decided by Filipov’s unyielding iron sense of justice. Some of the prisoners are sentenced to death; others see their terms commuted. The true mystery that unfolds in *Judgment*, however, involves how best to judge Filipov himself – a man whom the prisoners and townspeople alike alternately despise, fear, or pity.

Judgement and self-judgement were the order of the day. Soviet citizens and Party aspirants offered written and spoken confessions in meetings, on applications and in the press. The Soviet daily *Pravda* and its Yiddish-language affiliate *Der Emes* (both mean “Truth”) ran regular self-criticism

columns. The poet Dovid Hofshateyn, too, wrote an open letter expressing his desire “to again take my place among those who are building a new life for the Jewish working masses in the Soviet Union”. It was in this climate of severity, in 1926–7, that Bergelson wrote *Judgment*. These were the years of Stalin’s ascent to power, and of the Party’s extreme turn from any compromise with the Right. If you were not with the Soviet Union in the late 1920s, you were assumed to be against it.

A century after the Bolshevik Revolution, it is tempting to pass judgement on Bergelson and Hofshateyn’s decision to cast their lots with a regime that would eventually sentence them to death in the Lubyanka prison, alongside over a dozen fellow Jewish cultural figures, in August 1952. But these were complicated times: Benito Mussolini became the legal dictator of Italy in 1925, and by 1926 the Nazi party had established the Hitler Youth. In the face of many treacherous alternatives, the Revolution needed to be treated seriously.

Bergelson’s deeply psychological pre-Revolutionary prose had depicted a generation of

Jews who had lost their way amid changing social and political norms in the author's native Ukraine. By the 1920s, he was writing about émigrés in his adopted city of Berlin, before turning his attention, and his hopes, to the nascent Soviet Union. As in Bergelson's earlier novels, the characters in *Judgment* are imperfect people. They brood, and stumble as they go along. This includes Filipov himself: as one character suggests to another in a whisper, "perhaps he is also a sinner . . . like all men". Bergelson's ability to humanize his characters, Bolshevik and smuggler alike, has thwarted many past critics' attempts to understand the novel as a political declaration – from Western readers who dismissed *Judgment* as a Stalinist paean to Soviet ones who deemed it dangerously close to Bergelson's pre-Revolutionary modernism, and therefore apathetic towards the Revolution. As the translators, Harriet Murav and Sasha Senderovich, write in their introduction, "In seeing Bergelson's novel either as contraband or bribe, critics overlook *Judgment's* importance first and foremost as a work of literary fiction".

Bergelson's prose is characteristically spare and

effective. A klezmer musician “wore blue glasses that made him look worried, and he smelled of smoke fish, although there was none to be bought since before the war”. One male character observes, of the novel’s femme fatale, “Her eyes were innocent, as kosher as two crucifixes”. Bergelson deployed Yiddish to express the complex changes of modernity. The first chapter is populated entirely by non-Jewish characters, whose personalities, essences and Achilles heels emerge, in the original, in a language they would not plausibly have spoken. Senderovich and Murav – both scholars of Russian, as well as Yiddish, literature – have masterfully conveyed the tone of speech and description from that language, which is at once specific to an East European Jewish community and intimately connected to a multitude of other tongues.

The judgement that lies at the core of Bergelson’s novel is in equal parts Soviet, biblical and existential. The translated title cleverly evokes Kafka’s blend of bureaucracy and Jewish mysticism. But as the translators take care to note, the original title – *Midas haDin* (The Measure of

the Law) – has an unspoken counterpart – *Midas haRakhamim* (The Measure of Mercy) – that educated readers of the original would recognize. The original thus describes a world of justice bereft of mercy.

Might Bergelson, like Portia to Shylock, be arguing that “mercy seasons justice”? If so, then it is in the *form* of his writing, rather than in his narrative, that the author introduces mercy; his vivid description of all of his characters, regardless of their sympathies, is itself a form of mercy. With *Judgment*, Dovid Bergelson prompts his readers to view humanity with compassion in a rapidly polarizing moment.